

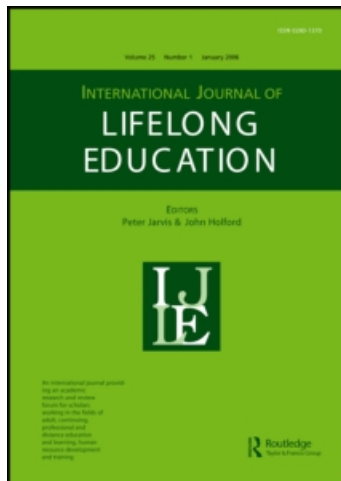
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# Re-inventing distance education, 1971–2001

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Over the period 1971–2001, distance education has changed enormously. This article identifies five key changes. Firstly, and technologically, the period opened with the establishment of one of the most successful of the multi-media based distance education systems, the UK Open University, but ends with the rush towards online education. This technological change underpins a second change, a pedagogical shift within distance education from a transmission model of education towards a constructivist model exploiting computer-mediated communication. Paradoxically this has occurred just when some commentators have seen the dehumanization of the traditional education. The third change has been the growing acceptance of distance education, and with this, its expansion. Linked to this is the fourth change – the change in the way distance education is perceived. It has moved from low status to acceptance, with increased confidence as its methods are adopted across education as a whole. Finally, distance education can be seen to be evolving from an essentially modernist (bureaucratic or Fordist) form of education into a post-modernist phenomenon with a focus on the student as consumer, on flexibility and global reach.

The choice of a time span within which to examine changes in the field of distance education is inevitably arbitrary. After all, the history of distance education goes back to at least 1840 when, capitalizing on the development of a cheap penny postal service in the UK, Sir Isaac Pitman first began to teach shorthand using correspondence teaching methods. Nevertheless, there are good reasons for looking at the development of distance education in the last 30 years. Firstly, this has been a period of rapid technological change. The educational arena within which technology has been most spectacularly applied to education is distance education. The pace of technological change is accelerating, and with it – and this is the second development – have come applications that are changing the pedagogic assumptions upon which distance education is founded. Linked to this is the fact that the differences between distance and traditional approaches to teaching are eroding. Thirdly, distance education has been increasingly seen as an integral part of educational provision. This is true for governments, for educational institutions and for corporate trainers. This arises in part from its ability to reach out to new sectors of the population, and in part from its ability to support mass education at a lower cost per student than traditional methods can achieve. With acceptance has come expansion. Fourthly, with increased recognition, distance educators have become more confident that they have something to say that is worth listening to. Finally, distance education practice fits with a number of developments in post-modernist society, including consumerism, globalization and the

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emergence of the post-bureaucratic organization. This article explores these trends in greater detail.

### **A technological history of distance education**

A *technologically-based* history might usefully identify four distinct phases in the history of distance education. Correspondence education, based on a combination of printed course materials and postal tuition, developed from the 1840s, and even now remains the basis for much of distance education, although the development of electronic mail will, I suspect, change it beyond recognition. A second wave of development involved the use of broadcasting to support isolated individuals and remote classrooms. By the 1940s radio was being used quite extensively in this way, with television coming into use in the late 1950s and 1960s. The 1960s in particular were the decade of the large-scale educational television projects in countries such as the Ivory Coast, Mexico, El Salvador, Brazil, etc. Examples of such systems have survived in the Telescundaria of Mexico (though this is now rapidly changing) and the Radio and Television Universities of China. Some of the broadcast-based systems used telephone and two-way radiotelephone links as a means of providing contact and feedback. A third wave saw the development of multi-media systems using text, video- and audio-technologies. Any of the above approaches could be combined with some face-to-face teaching.

The earliest and most celebrated example of the third generation multi-media approach was the British Open University, planned in the 1960s, given its Royal Charter in 1969, and teaching its first cohort of 25 000 students in 1971. For nearly 20 years this model was in the forefront of distance education, changing gradually as the technology changed. Thus audiocassettes largely replaced radio, videocassettes, were used more often, and technologies such as Cyclops came and went. It was adopted (and adapted) elsewhere in the world as other distance teaching universities were established (see Rumble and Harry 1982 for an early account of these developments).

In the early 1980s, a new revolution was heralded. The development of relatively cheap and increasingly powerful PCs (from the mid-1980s) and, even more important, the development and growth of the World Wide Web/Internet, has ushered in a fourth generation of distance education systems – that of online or virtual education systems. As in the past, the literature on distance education focuses heavily on the latest technological developments, and the present is no exception. New applications emerge almost daily. Even as I write the British Government has proposed the establishment of a new e-university consortium intended to take the best of British higher education and deliver it electronically around the globe. The value of the new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are being extensively researched.

### **A history of pedagogical separation and convergence**

The technological history of distance education underpins another history, a *pedagogic history of distance education*. Distance education involves being in the absence of a teacher. This does not, however, mean the total absence of a teacher. There is nothing new in individuals teaching themselves, both for their own pleasure and in preparation for examination. The Chinese Imperial examination system, first developed in the Sui

dynasty (598–618 CE), and continuing into the 20th century, encouraged personal candidates to prepare themselves for the imperial examinations (Latchem and Xinzheng 1999: 9–10). In modern China, the Higher Education for Self-Taught Learners system, set up in 1983, had by 1996 registered more than 20 million participants and recorded 6.1 million examinees (*ibid.*: 6). Such approaches have been tried elsewhere. The University of London's External Degree programme, set up in 1858, also allowed individuals to prepare themselves for the University's examinations. However, these approaches provide little or no support, and dropout is high. Teaching yourself is not the same as being taught and helped to learn.

Most adult students need some guidance and help if they are to succeed in their studies. In the 19th century the normal pattern of support was the 'Oxbridge' tutorial system, through which a student's individual tutor suggested tutorials and seminars that they might attend, and books and articles that they might wish to consult. London External students either had to fend for themselves, or register with one of the commercial correspondence colleges, such as Wolsey Hall and University Correspondence College, which developed to provide some kind of tutorial support for them. In distance education systems, more reliance was placed on materials to carry the teaching, and less on the relatively expensive provision of tutorial support.

But in any case, change was occurring in the traditional universities. The Oxbridge tutorial system could not survive the massification of education (Sewart 1992: 231–223). Over several decades, the development of sub-divisions of knowledge led to the emergence of subject specialists who taught large groups of students through lectures. The specialization of academic work broke the personal relationship between student and tutor, leading to increased depersonalization of the process. Then lecture classes came to be seen as an inefficient way of transferring information from the teacher to the student (Bligh 1971). This realization, coupled with increasing pressures on staff time, has resulted – again over decades – in the gradual adoption by traditional universities of resource-based and independent learning strategies. Such developments are by no means wholly welcomed by academics. Ritzer (1993, 1998: 151–62) has described the effects of such changes as a McDonaldization of higher education, involving the gradual dehumanization and instrumentalization of higher education. Many of the new approaches, as Ritzer (1998: 160) points out, involve a one-way flow of information 'with no possibility of Baudrillard's (1976//1993) symbolic exchange between those who teach and those who learn'.

This echoes precisely the criticism of much distance education practice. In order to help students learn, correspondence and distance educators from the beginning developed teaching materials. The quality of these materials has varied from the very poor to the exceedingly good. When the Open University started teaching in 1971, its materials were seen by many as involving a quantum leap in quality. Nevertheless, they attracted criticism from some, on the grounds that they were packaged with aims, objectives and content all predetermined by the course designers. This, some argued, resulted in conceptual closure, and the pre-construction of a largely passive student (Harris 1987: 139). There was none of the uncertainty and messiness of a lecture-driven course, and none of the serendipity that arises from browsing in a library, and that might lead the student towards the construction of his or her own understanding. Nor were there the spaces where students could enter into dialogue with other students: to cite Harris (1987: 142): 'Distance education on the OU pattern at least, is the only form of higher education specifically designed on any other basis than the democratic discussion' where there is 'argument between people, unconstrained discussions which

raise “validity claims” of several types, and which settle these claims only by force of the better argument’. And, as the research was beginning to show, knowledge without understanding constituted surface, not deep, learning, and understanding came from constructing one’s own knowledge through argument among other things.

One could say that in this regard mass higher education as practised in the traditional universities was, and is, becoming much more like the kind of approach developed by distance educators. As Ritzer (1998: 157) says, ‘Advanced technology will abound at McUniversity’. Many of the technologies that they will use will provide a one-way flow of information, thus achieving.

The goal of the university will also be to make it easier for students to obtain the various educational services it offers. Among other things, this means that it will go to the students rather than waiting for the students to come to it (Ritzer, 1998: 156).

Such universities will provide students with what they want, on the doorstep, open all hours, stripped of collegial activities, based on high quality products delivered at a lower cost (Levine 1993: 4). This merging of distance and traditional forms of education has been explored in several books (for example, Thorpe and Grugeon 1994, Tait and Mills 1999, Evans and Nation 2000). Indeed, it is instructive to review the language with which the relationship between distance and traditional forms of higher education has been couched in recent years in the Australian context, where dual mode institutions (that is institutions charged with teaching in both ways), as opposed to single-mode (distance teaching only institutions) are the norm. In the early years of distance education most non-distance educators ignored distance education entirely, often regarding it as of poor quality. However, when the University of New England was set up in 1955, its entire academic staff was required to teach both on- and off-campus. Initially, as distance education proved itself, there were calls for ‘parity of esteem’ between the two modes. By the early 1980s those providing leadership in Australian distance education programmes were talking of a convergence between the two modes (cf. the title of Smith and Kelly’s 1984 book) – a term that has recently gained greater prominence within the UK context (Tait and Mills 1999). Australia, however, remains ahead of this game: in the early 1990s Jevons and Guiton (1992) were speaking of ‘interlocking study modes’ based on the principle that the same curriculum was taught on- and off-campus, with students free to choose their mode of study to suit their circumstances and inclinations. Now, there is less talk about the differences between the two modes and much more a shared language around the concepts of teaching and learning – and with this have come other terms to describe what people are trying to do, such as flexible learning.

If Ritzer’s view of higher education is that, in the light of these developments, it is becoming more like dehumanized, one-way distance education, distance educators themselves are now excited by the possibilities of the Internet and computer mediated communications (CMC) to change the very nature of the pedagogy of distance education. Of course, even in those earlier forms of distance education that relied heavily on one-way communications, there were design strategies that could get around the problem of over-packaged materials to construct a course that students had to work at in order to achieve understanding. Such strategies do not, however, get round the problem that, in first and second generation distance education, the content is usually fixed, with students unable either physically or in the time they have available, to explore other sources of information, nor does it get around the problem that such

dialogue as does take place is internalized, private, with oneself and what one can derive from the author's words – what Holmberg (1989: 47–50) called 'guided didactic conversation' – which is not the cut and thrust of argument between separate minds.

The Internet has, however, opened up the possibility of on-line education, in which students can both access materials from numerous sources, and enter into dialogue with their fellows and with the tutors. In essence, so the argument goes, the technologies of the earlier generation distance education systems (correspondence-based print-delivered systems, broadcast-based systems and multimedia systems reliant on one-way media) reinforced a transmission model of teaching and learning. In such models, teaching is the giving of accurate information, within a structured environment, sequentially, over time, leading to reward for performance; while learning is the correct performance of task, based on cumulative practice, until such time as the information, skills or behaviours imparted by the teacher have been mastered and can be reproduced.

Against the transmission model, there are constructivist, sociocultural and metacognitive models of education (Renshaw 1995). The constructivist assumes that learning is the active development of personal understanding, based on interpretation and selection, the personal construction of meaning, and its continuing review and integration with new information and understanding. Teaching is setting challenging tasks, observed and supporting learner's activity, creating dissonance and helping learners to reconsider. The sociocultural model assumes that learning is social, involves assisted performance, is interactive and co-constructive, is regulated by the group and involves the formation and evaluation of shared values. Teaching is a joint activity, it is guiding the conversation, helping joint constructions to form, enacting shared group values. The metacognitive model is reflective, it helps learners step back from their own learning and monitor it, in order to improve their understanding. In this model, teaching supports and assists reflection.

The two-way / multi-way technology of online distance education can, its proponents argue, assist the evolution of constructivist and sociocultural models of education. So far as constructivist models are concerned, online learning or

Tele-learning in the home is a testbed for... ideas [about the empowerment of students as effective decision-makers about their own learning processes], ideas that are supported by learning theorists who see learning as a constructivist activity, fundamentally an individual experience and an experience in which the individual must have real self-responsibility (Collis 1996: 135).

On-line education is an equally powerful enabler of sociocultural models of education.

To understand the impact of such ideas, one must review the past provision of two-way communication within distance education. The earliest generation of distance education system relied on postal communication, which was often slow and sometimes unreliable. There is research-based evidence that slow turn-round time (the elapsed time between the submission of an assignment and the receipt of the returned assignment with the tutor's comments and marks) increased dropout rates significantly. While the telephone added another, more immediate form of communication, it suffers from the problems of playing telephone tag, and it is often intrusive and unwelcome. Scheduled group-based face-to-face, and audio- and, later on, video-conferencing, added a further dimension, though with the disadvantage that such sessions had to be timetabled, cutting across the time-free advantages of distance education, and generally required attendance at a focal point where students could meet or be connected to the tutor. All these approaches were seen as, at best, a poor substitute for regular face-to-

face contact. Not surprisingly, perhaps, many distance education systems forsook the pure path of distance education and incorporated a limited number of face-to-face tutorials and even some longer residential period of study into their teaching strategy.

Thus early proponents of online education saw it as a 'new domain' for collaborative learning (Harasim 1989: 50), as something that would 'ultimately emerge as a new educational paradigm' (Kaye 1989: 3; see also Tiffin and Rajasingham 1995: 8–18). Further, it is suggested that these approaches might be applied elsewhere in higher education, and not just within distance education. Indeed, the relation between the impoverishment of traditional teaching methods in the face of massification and efficiency 'gains', the use of media and the emergence of constructivist and sociocultural models of education, has led some to argue for the complete transformation of the higher education system – involving the application of technology throughout higher education with a view to improving student learning (Laurillard 1993).

Perhaps it is not so surprising that the last 30 years have seen distance education progress from poor relation through parity of esteem towards convergence, integration and now potential leadership. After all,

Even in a conventional 'face-to-face' system, students spend much of their time working on their own. It may always have been so, but the increase in resources for individual learning and especially those through the new technologies has provided students with far more powerful tools for independent learning (Wagner 1997).

### **A history of acceptance and expansion**

The last 30 years have seen an equally significant revolution at institutional and suprainsitutional level. Commercial providers dominated the early history of distance education, and it was unscrupulous commercial practices on the part of some providers that gave distance education a bad name. The practice on the part of unconscionable operators of charging fees up front with no chance of a refund, and of providing minimal support so that drop-out was common, saved on costs because services did not need to be provided, and increased profits. There were, however, those who entered the sector for entirely praiseworthy reasons. They wanted to open up access to groups of students who would otherwise be unable to participate in education. Herein lies the important juncture between distance education, adult education and continuing or lifelong education.

The late 19th century entry of a number of universities into the field of distance education marked the development of dual-mode systems – that is, institutions that teach both on campus and at a distance. In the USA the impetus for these developments came from the university extension movement and resulted in pioneering efforts by Illinois Wesleyan College (1874), the (short-lived) Correspondence University at Ithaca, New York State (1883), the University Extension Department of Chicago University (1890) and the University of Wisconsin. In Australia the vast distances and dispersed population led the founders of the University of Queensland (1911) to insist that it assume a responsibility for off-campus extension (Holmerg 1986: 8–11). There were similar developments in Canadian universities and rather later, in India with the establishment of Correspondence Directorates in various Indian universities. Elsewhere, the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s set up entirely new regional and all-Union

polytechnic distance teaching universities. But it was Australia that first used correspondence education, initially in Victoria from 1914, to set up 'in a systematic way, and on a large scale, ... complete primary and secondary education for children who had never been to school' (Rayner 1949: 12).

These developments marked the entry of publicly funded bodies into the field. But the real expansion in distance education has come in the last 30 years with the realization that distance education could be used to support a whole range of formal and non-formal, academic and vocational, purposes, often at a lower cost per student than traditional solutions. At the non-formal level, and particularly though not exclusively in developing countries, mass media have been linked with face-to-face activity to support agriculture, health, nutrition, family planning and political education – though the resources required to sustain programmes have rarely been provided, and the promise has never been fulfilled (Perraton 2000: 15–31). At schools levels, distance education methods have been used both to support weak schools and to create schools where none existed previously. Most of these projects involved the use of television, or radio or computers. Since the mid-1970s Nicaraguan Radio Mathematics Project, there has been a continuing and successful, if generally small scale, use of interactive radio to support subject teaching in schools. On the other hand, educational television projects have had a poor press: it was said of the Côte d'Ivoire ETV project that 'never was so much wasted ... on such poor television broadcasts with so little effect' (Hawkrige 1987: 2), yet the Mexican Telescundaria, now in the process of significant re-engineering, has performed consistently to extend schooling into communities where, without it, there would have been far fewer opportunities for access.

It is in vocational and higher education that distance education has been most significant. In teacher education (as in other vocational fields), it is the potential of distance education to deliver in-service education and training that is so important, both to train poorly educated and unqualified teachers, and to provide continuing professional development for those in the classroom. Distance education has made a huge quantitative difference to the opportunities for teacher training in countries as diverse as the UK, where the Open University in its early days provided a route for large numbers of non-graduate teachers to gain a degree and, more recently, has provided access to continuing professional development, and Nigeria, where the National Teachers' Institute enrolled nearly 187000 students on its teacher upgrading programme between 1984 and 1990 (Bako and Rumble 1993: 211). It has generally done this at a lower unit cost per trainee. Evidence on the quality of the training and the extent to which teacher's practice as opposed to their subject knowledge has been improved is much more difficult to come by – but overall the findings appear positive. This relative success story can, moreover, be extended into other professional areas – including such diverse fields as management education, medical updating, the inservice-updating and upgrading of nurses, etc. Additionally, resource-based learning has been adopted by industry, the armed forces and public services, as a means of bringing down training costs.

The most spectacular growth has been at the higher educational level. Although not the first distance teaching university, the UK's Open University, established in 1969, was a beacon project from the start: one American academic commented that: 'So great has been the flow of visitors to this institution that it is becoming a mark of distinction among American educators to be able to say that one has not visited the Open University' (Valley 1972: 106). Other distance teaching universities followed quickly, in all parts of the world, though some countries (for example, Sweden and Australia)



consciously took the decision not to develop such institutions. In all cases successful implementation came with strong government backing; lukewarm or weak backing (as in Nigeria) resulted in planning failures. The size of the institutions varies enormously: the Universidad Estatal a Distancia in Costa Rica has about 10000 students; the so-called mega-universities many times this number (the Indira Gandhi National Open University in India had 394000 students in 1998; the China Radio and Television University nearly 527000 in 1996/97, Anadolu Open University in Turkey 305000 in 1992/3). According to Perraton (2000: 1), 'between 5 and 12 per cent of university students in industrialised countries are likely to be studying at a distance; in developing countries the figure is often between 10 and 20 per cent'.

But in spite of the attention given to so-called single-mode (teaching only at a distance) institutions, there are far more programmes based in dual-mode institutions. Furthermore, in 1989 the vast majority of the programmes were quite small in scale (45% of single-mode systems had between 1000 and 10000 students and 25% under 1000, while only 1% of dual-mode systems had more than 10000 students, and 60% had under 1000) (Hallak 1990: 187). Then, as now, and notwithstanding the prominence given to the mega-universities with over 100000 students each (Daniel 1996), most distance education projects are quite small.

This raises some interesting questions about the optimal size and structure of institutions. Earlier, in the 1970s, there were strong arguments in favour of single-mode systems, since traditional academics, it was said, were not interested in anything but face-to-face, on-campus teaching. As we have seen, this argument is now less crucial. But, additionally, the early evidence showed that distance teaching universities could be very cost efficient when compared with traditional universities teaching by face-to-face means (Rumble 1997: 137–151, 1999a). In part this was a function of the size of their enrolments, though this was not the only factor at play: Other factors needing to be taken into account include (Rumble 1998a, 2000):

- the number of courses on offer (which affects the level of investment in developing and producing materials);
- the number of years courses are presented, and the frequency with which materials have to be remade;
- the choice of technology;
- the level of individualized and group-based student support;
- the organizational structure;
- working practices; and
- the nature of the internal labour market and the nature of the contracts of employment.

The expectation that distance teaching schools, colleges and universities would be more cost-efficient than traditional ones led to some quite odd assumptions: for example, the planners setting up the Andhra Pradesh Open University cited a 1977 study of the cost-efficiency of the UK Open University (Wagner 1977) as evidence that similar cost savings might be expected in India. This wholly ignored the very different conditions in India and the UK – for example, the relative cost of labour to equipment differs in the two countries, as does the way in which labour is deployed and organized. More significantly, their conclusion also ignored data that the *additional* costs of adding a distance teaching capability to a traditional university (for example, by videotaping lectures for remote site use) could be very low indeed (Wagner 1975). Modern studies confirm the relatively low costs of building in dual-mode working practices (Fwu *et al.*

1992). Renwick (1996: 59–60) suggests that universities adopting dual-mode approaches may have an edge on single-mode distance education:

They already offer a wide range of degrees and qualifications that rival open universities, could diversify at less cost, would not necessarily have to rely on large numbers of enrolments to be viable as providers of distance programmes, and could offer a wide range of options to potential students.

Further, such materials, once in existence, can be used on campus to transform the pedagogy of on-campus provision, and reduce costs by freeing staff time to support the expanding numbers of students in other ways. It is this latter possibility that weakens the economic case in favour of distance teaching universities. Daniel (1996: 68), for example, approvingly cites Keegan's (1994) defence of the competitive advantages of distance teaching universities, and in particular the latter's view that their size is a competitive advantage, and then goes on himself to analyse where size will be an asset to the mega-universities as they adapt to a new generation of technologies. He contends that the 11 mega-universities, as a group, enrol 2.8 million students at an average institutional cost per student that is at most half that of the combined 182 higher education institutions in the UK (about \$10000 per student with 1.6 million students) or the 3500 institutions US higher education system (about \$12500 with some 14 million students) (Daniel 1996: 32).

The comparison is, however, flawed. This is because the traditional sector is undergoing a revolution that is changing its cost structures (Rumble 1998a: 104). Writing about UK higher education, but linking this to developments elsewhere, Scott (1997: 38, emphasis added) has commented:

... the massification of British higher education is demonstrated [by] the sharp reduction in unit costs. Overall productivity gains of more than 25 per cent have been achieved since 1990.... This pattern, which exactly matches the expansion of student number, closely follows the cost curves in other countries where mass higher education systems developed earlier than in Britain. *It supports the claim that mass systems have a quite different economy from that of elite systems.*

Within the context of a mass education, industrialized approach to the provision of higher education, the cost advantage that the distance teaching universities enjoyed in the 1970s has evaporated in the face of the McDonaldization of the traditional universities.

There is a problem if one extrapolates too simplistically from this position: both distance teaching universities such as the Open University, and dual-mode systems, are seeking to exploit online education as part of a strategy to gain leverage in a global education market. The costs of online education have yet to be fully established, but all the indications are that this is not a cheap option, and that will drive institutional costs up (because the cost of developing online materials and of tutoring online will be much higher) (Rumble 1999b, 1999c).

Two further issues arise. The Open University in the UK, along with other distance teaching universities such as the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia in Spain, was established not just to provide additional university places (though this was the significant factor in some foundations), but rather to provide access to those who did not or had not had the chance to attend a traditional university. Its foundation was driven by a sense of equity. It was also set up because the traditional universities had no interest in the adult higher education market. The first issue is, would one set up an institution such as the Open University today? In similar conditions of academic

conservatism and in cases where there are too few traditional universities to meet demand, it can make sense to establish a distance teaching university. But as traditional universities re-engineer themselves, and as they seek to meet the lifelong needs of learners, so the need for single-mode institutions like the Open University declines. The interesting question of the next 20 to 30 years will be, which model survives?

The second issue relates to the access mission of open universities. There is a general trend to load a greater proportion of the costs of study on to students. There is evidence that higher fees deter some individuals from applying (Rumble 1997: 194–197). Further, the adoption of online education either adds vastly to the institutional budget which has to provide students with equipment, or places a technological entry charge on students in the form of the capital and running costs of home computing. This severely threatens any mission that distance teaching universities have of reaching out to those who are economically and (since the two often go together) educationally deprived. Now it may well be thought to be quite acceptable to change the orientation of ‘open’ universities in this way – to change in other words, the way in which we interpret what openness means (Rumble 1989) – but we ought to know that this is what we are doing.

### **The emergent confident-practitioner**

From the perspective of 2001 it is difficult to recall the extent to which distance education was marginalized in the early part of the last century. Writing in the US-based *Home Study Review*, Stein (1961: 95) asked of correspondents educators, ‘Why are we ignored?’ Some of the isolation, he felt, arose because correspondence educators ‘cut their professional ties with the rest of the educational world’, but it was also, among other reasons, because correspondence education had ‘found its greatest usefulness as a medium of adult education – and ... adult education is at the bottom of the educational ladder’ (1961: 97), because it was tainted by the commercialism and poor quality of some ‘unscrupulous operators’ (p. 98), and because so many educators believed that ‘learning can only occur in the physical presence of the teacher’, and that as a result correspondence education can only be ‘a second best alternative’ (p. 98). Similar sentiments were expressed in the UK by Harris (1967), in an article in *Adult Education*. Marginalization often translated into low status: thus, for example, Singh (1979: 87) reported on the low status accorded lecturers in the Indian Correspondence Directorates, while Siaciwena (1983: 70) reported on the low status given to the University of Zambia’s external programme, which led lecturers to ignore their external studies’ duties in favour of focusing on their on-campus teaching.

One thrust of the period under review has been the search by distance educators for professional status. Some of this was already under way – the (US) National Home Study Council was established in 1926, the International Council for Correspondence Education (now the International Council for Distance Education) held its first conference in 1938, the Association of British Correspondence Colleges was formed in 1955. Such bodies provided a forum where practitioners could meet. But by the 1980s this had developed into a claim for discipline status on the basis of the existence of a research-based body of theory, with a specialized vocabulary of practice; the existence of postgraduate courses and qualifications on distance education in a number of universities; and the fact that the sector had all the accoutrements of an academic discipline, including specialist journals in the field, specialist national and international

conferences, and even professors with chairs in distance education. Holmberg (1989: 207), for example, suggested that while distance education might be described as an interdisciplinary field of study that was entitled 'to be assigned a place under the comprehensive discipline of education', it could 'only to a limited extent be described, understood, and explained in terms of conventional... classroom teaching, or group activities... and so it makes sense to describe it as a special discipline with its roots in education...'.

Whether such claims have validity is less important than the extent to which concepts and methods developed within distance education are now being applied, along with technologies, to education in general.

### **Distance education as a post-modernist phenomenon**

The context within which education is carried out has changed enormously over the last 30 years (Gibbons *et al.* 1994, Barnett and Griffin 1997, Ritzer 1998, Jarvis, 2000). The symptoms of change include a massive world-wide population growth with a consequential demand for the expansion of educational provision, globalization, the decline of state power in the face of international capitalism, the withdrawal of state provision and support areas that were previously regarded as a public service, the rise of information technology and the knowledge-based economy, and the massive change in the way in which people earn their livings. There has been an expansion of primary and secondary education; the massification of higher education which has entailed the abandonment of an elitist approach; the substitution of instrumental praxis for cognitive norms; an emphasis on education and training for economic growth and the world of work, both in respect of initial and of lifelong education and training; an increased emphasis on competencies (instrumental praxis rather than cognitive norms); the loss of the university's near monopoly on the ownership, validation and transmission of knowledge; the incorporation of higher education and academia into the knowledge industry; a commodification of knowledge; the marketization of higher education; the shift from producer-led to market-led provision and the rise of the student-customer in place of the student (with an attendant growth in litigation). With these changes have come a strong emphasis on the individual at the centre of the learning process, with the individual responsible for managing and directing their own training, updating, and education; an increased service-industry orientation on behalf of education; a changing role for the teacher – from teacher to mentor/guide/advisor; an increased emphasis on flexibility of provision; the modularization of courses (with its implications for the way that knowledge is presented); the quasi-marketization of education; the globalization of education; and a search for educational partnerships and collaborative structures (though this has been more real in the rhetoric than in the reality) as part of a competitive strategy to position oneself in the marketplace.

These pressures have required higher education and the providers of lifelong education to change, and they will require yet further changes. They have brought new actors into the educational market place, both as providers and as consumers. Not surprisingly, perhaps, there has been a consequential interest in distance education methods as a means of achieving these ends. This interest has been fuelled by the growth of new technologies that seem to preserve two-way communication and dialogue within the educational processes that the support. These changes have also led to a questioning of the organization of production within distance education. Most of the present

medium and large-scale providers are essentially modernist organizations, massive Weberian bureaucracies offering standardized products in standardized ways. This is no longer acceptable, so the search is on for means to create flexibility within the constraints of such organizations. But there are also possibilities of evolving much more flexible, post-bureaucratic, organizational forms that will be even more responsive to the individual (Rumble 1998b) – though this is likely to be at a cost.

To what extent is distance education peculiarly attuned to the times? Perhaps its focus on the individual, its empowerment of the individual's right to opt in and out of education, and to study flexibly, its obvious commodification of education, its ability to operate globally, and the possibility that it offers of developing multi-actor partnerships, positions it as an essentially postmodern form of educational provision. And eventually, of course, just as it has changed over the past 30 years, it will change again in response to 'post-postmodernist' developments. But, whatever the future, one thing is certain: the next 30 years will bring to distance education more change, and more far-reaching change, than the last 30 have done.

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